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DR. ELLIOT DORFF, REV. DR. FREDERICK BORSCH

DR. REBECCA ALPERT, DONAL GODREY, S.J.

A SYMPOSIUM

**NEW JEWISH AND CHRISTIAN
APPROACHES TO HOMOSEXUALITY**

**THE 2002 SWIG LECTURE
APRIL 21, 2002**

**THE SWIG JUDAIC STUDIES PROGRAM
AT THE
UNIVERSITY OF SAN FRANCISCO**

Theology Library

CLAREMONT

SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY David Robinson, S.J.

David Robinson, S.J., is Director of the Interdisciplinary Studies Program and Director of the Office of Educational Mission and Spirituality of Learning at the College of Professional Studies, University of San Francisco. He holds undergraduate and graduate degrees in literature from Boston University and the University of California at Berkeley, an MFA in Music from Mills College, a Master of Divinity Degree from the Jesuit School of Theology, Berkeley, and a Ph.D. in Theology and the Arts from the Graduate Theological Union. David has spoken and written in the areas of theology, philosophy, cultural impacts of technology, and spirituality. His current interests include the spirituality of organizations, technology and media, and the influence of neurocognitive and complex systems elements on learning processes.

Donal Godfrey, S.J.

A resident minister at the University of San Francisco, Donal Godfrey, S.J., holds a Bachelor of Civil Law degree from the National University of Ireland; a Barrister-at-Law degree, Dublin (1982); a Bachelor of Philosophy from the Milltown Institute of Theology and Philosophy in Dublin (1986); a Master of Divinity from the University of Toronto (1991); and a Licentiate in Sacred Theology from the Jesuit School of Theology, Berkeley (1993).

Donal is currently writing a dissertation on the Most Holy Redeemer Parish, San Francisco, for his Doctorate in Ministry at the Church Divinity School of the Pacific, which is part of the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley. His study will concentrate on how that parish became inclusive and welcoming of the gay and Catholic community in the Castro area of San Francisco, where the parish is located.

Frederick Houk Borsch

Frederick Houk Borsch is the retired Bishop of the Episcopal Diocese of Los Angeles. Educated at Princeton, Oxford, and the General Theological Seminary, his Ph.D. is from the University of Birmingham in England. In addition to teaching posts in England, at Seabury-Western and the General Theological Seminaries, he was formerly Dean, President, and Professor of New Testament at the Church Divinity School of the Pacific and Dean of the Chapel with rank of Professor of Religion at Princeton University where he taught in the Program in History, Archaeology, and Religions of the Ancient World. From 1988-2000, he was Chair of the Theology Committee for the House of Bishops of the Episcopal Church.

Contributor of essays, articles, and poetry to a number of journals and newspapers, he is the author of sixteen books, the most recent of which is *The Magic Word: Stirrings and Stories of Faith and Ministry* (Los Angeles: Cathedral Center Press, 2001). He has been a conference leader and given university and seminary lectures at a number of institutions in this country and abroad. In 1985, he was for thirteen weeks the preacher for the Protestant Hour.

Jeffrey S. Siker

Jeffrey S. Siker is Professor and Graduate Director of Theological Studies at Loyola Marymount University, where he has taught courses in biblical studies since 1987. He grew up in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania; received a BA and MA from Indiana University (in Music and Religious Studies); received his M.Div. from Yale Divinity School, and his Ph.D. in New Testament from Princeton Theological Seminary. His expertise includes the areas of early Jewish/Christian relations, the history of biblical interpretation, and uses of the Bible in ethics. He is the author of many articles and several books, including *Disinheriting the Jews: Abraham in Early Christian Controversy* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1991), and most recently *Scripture and Ethics: 20th Century Portraits* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), and was the editor of *Homosexuality in the Church: Both Sides of the Debate* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1994).

Dr. Siker is also ordained as a minister in the Presbyterian Church (USA), has pastored churches in Michigan and New Jersey, and is active as a speaker in various churches in Southern California. In addition to editing *Homosexuality in the Church: Both Sides of the Debate*, he has also written: "How to Decide? Homosexual Christians, the Bible, and Gentile Inclusion."

Theology Today 51:2 (July, 1994) 219-234; "Gentile Wheat and Homosexual Christians: New Testament Directions for the Heterosexual Church," in R. L. Brawley, ed., *Biblical Ethics and Homosexuality* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1996) 137-151; and the article on Homosexuality for the forthcoming *Encyclopedia of Protestantism*, H. Hillerbrand, ed. (New York: Routledge).

Patricia Beattie Jung

Patricia Beattie Jung is a Roman Catholic lay theologian. Currently she is an Associate Professor of Theology at Loyola University Chicago, where she teaches doctoral and undergraduate courses on issues foundational to moral theology and sexual ethics. She has published several books on these topics. Most recently she edited, with Mary Hunt and Radhika Balakrishnan *Good Sex: Feminist Perspectives from the World's Religions* (Piscataway, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2001) and, with Joseph A. Coray *Sexual Diversity and Catholicism: Toward the Development of Moral Theology* (Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 2001).

Rebecca T. Alpert

Rebecca T. Alpert is the Codirector of the Womens Studies Program and Associate Professor of Religion and Womens Studies at Temple University. A graduate of Barnard College, she was ordained as a rabbi at the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College in 1976 and served as dean of students there for ten years. She has taught Jewish Studies at Haverford and Bryn Mawr Colleges; at Rutgers University, Camden, New Jersey; Gratz College; and The Reconstructionist Rabbinical College. Rabbi Alpert is the coauthor (with Jacob Staub) of *Exploring Judaism: A Reconstructionist Approach* (Wyncote, PA: 1985; rev. ed., 2000), author of *Like Bread on the Seder Plate: Jewish Lesbians and the Transformation of Tradition* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1977), editor of *Voices of the Religious Left: A Contemporary Sourcebook* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2000) and co-editor (with Sue Elwell and Shirley Idelson) of *Lesbian Rabbis: The First Generation* (Newark, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2001). She has written numerous articles on Jewish medical ethics and contemporary Jewish life, published in *Tikkun*, *Judaism*, *Shofar*, and *The Journal of American Ethnic History*.

Elliot N. Dorff

Elliot N. Dorff was ordained a Conservative rabbi by the Jewish Theological Seminary of America in 1970 and earned his Ph.D. in philosophy from Columbia University in 1971 with a dissertation in moral theory. Since then he has directed the rabbinical and masters programs at the University of Judaism, where he currently is Rector and Distinguished Professor of Philosophy. He also teaches a course on Jewish law at UCLA School of Law as a visiting professor.

Rabbi Dorff is a member of the Conservative Movements Committee on Jewish Law and Standards and the editorial committee of the new Torah commentary for the Conservative Movement. His papers have formulated the validated stance of the Conservative Movement on infertility treatments and on end-of-life issues, and his Rabbinic Letters on human sexuality and on poverty have become the voice of the Conservative Movement on those topics. He has chaired two scholarly organizations, the Academy of Jewish Philosophy and the Jewish Law Association. He served on the Ethics Committee of Hillary Rodham Clinton's Health Care Task Force and has testified on behalf of the Jewish tradition on the subjects of human cloning and stem cell research before the Presidents National Bioethics Advisory Commission. In 1999 and 2000 he was part of the Surgeon General's commission to draft a Call to Action for Responsible Sexual Behavior; and he now serves on a commission charged with reviewing and revising the federal guidelines for protecting human subjects in research projects.

In Los Angeles, he is a Vice President of Jewish Family Service, and he is a member of the Ethics committees at the Jewish Homes for the Aging and UCLA Medical Center. He serves as Co-chair of the Priest-Rabbi Dialogue sponsored by the Los Angeles Archdiocese and the Board of Rabbis of Southern California, and he is a Vice President of the Academy for Jewish, Christian, and Muslim Studies. Rabbi Dorff's publications include over 150 articles on Jewish thought, law, and ethics, together with eight books.

**The Swig Judaic Studies Program
at the University of San Francisco
proudly presents:**

New Jewish and Christian Approaches to Homosexuality

Welcoming our Gay and Lesbian Sisters and Brothers

- 1:00 Greeting and Introduction
Dr. Andrew R. Heinze, Director, Swig Judaic Studies Program
- 1:10 Preliminary Comments
*David C. Robinson, S.J., Director, Educational Mission,
College of Professional Studies, USF*
- 1:15 Panel 1
*Dr. Patti Jung, Loyola University
Dr. Jeffrey Siker, Loyola Marymount University
Dr. Elliot Dorff, University of Judaism*
- 2:15 Questions and Dialogue with Audience
- 2:45 Intermission
- 3:15 Panel 2
*Rev. Dr. Frederick Houk Borsch, former Bishop,
Archdiocese of Los Angeles
Dr. Rebecca Alpert, Temple University
Donal Godfrey, S.J., Graduate Theological Union*
- 4:15 Questions and Dialogue with Audience
- 4:45 Closing Remarks
Andrew R. Heinze

Thank you to our Co-sponsors:

The Gay and Lesbian Alliance-Jewish Community Federation; Bay Area Jewish Healing Center; Jewish Community Center of San Francisco; Osher Marin Jewish Community Center; Congregation Rodef Sholom; Congregation Kol Shofar; Keshet Chavurah of Congregation Beth Sholom; Grace Episcopal Cathedral; Dignity/San Francisco, A Community of LGBT Catholics our families and our friends; Most Holy Redeemer Parish; Metropolitan Community Church, San Francisco; The Center for Lesbian and Gay Studies in Religion and Ministry at Pacific School of Religion, Berkeley; Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Outreach Project-Jewish Family and Children's Services.

Special thanks to Patricia Lin and David Robinson for their encouragement and guidance and to Mary Silver for coordinating the event.

New Jewish and Christian Approaches to Homosexuality

"My soul is severely troubled; and thou, O Lord, how long? O Lord, deliver my life once again I am worn out with my groaning; every night I flood my bed with tears. . . ." *Psalm 6 (recited in the Jewish weekday service)*

Homosexuality is one of the most urgent and controversial topics in the Jewish and Christian worlds today.

Jews and Christians who base their lives on a serious (but not a literal) reading of the Bible have no choice but to wrestle with scriptural passages in both the Torah and the Gospels that categorize homosexual acts as sins. They do so at a point in history when new understandings of sexual orientation have emerged within Western culture, according to which homosexuality is an inborn tendency in some men and women and not a perversion of human nature.

In addition to the theological question that comes with changing notions of human sexuality, we confront the stigmatization and persecution of men and women solely because of their sexual orientation.

With those problems in mind, I wanted to bring together a group of speakers who were able to address both the academic and the pastoral dimensions of homosexuality within the Biblical faiths. I was not able to locate Muslim religious thinkers to participate in such a symposium, hence the selection of two Jewish, two Catholic and two Protestant speakers: Rebecca Alpert (Temple University), Elliot Dorff (University of Judaism), Patricia Jung (Loyola University), Donal Godfrey, S.J. (Graduate Theological Union), Jeffrey Siker (Loyola Marymount University), and Frederick Borsch (former Bishop, Archdiocese of Los Angeles).

On Sunday, April 21, 2002, the Swig Judaic Studies Program at the University of San Francisco hosted a gathering of approximately two hundred people from the San Francisco Bay Area to ponder "New Jewish and Christian Approaches to Homosexuality." One of the first, and perhaps the first, interfaith conversation on homosexuality at an American university, our symposium elicited a powerful sense among Christians and Jews of the common human predicament faced by individuals within very different religious communities.

The symposium was geared to the general public rather than to an academic audience. Accordingly, I asked our speakers to combine theological reflection with an accessible message. They did so admirably, making for a rich and satisfying afternoon of conversation with an audience that was obviously moved by the event.

As a result of the significance of the symposium, we have decided to publish the proceedings as the Swig Lecture for 2002.

— Andrew R. Heinze, Director, Swig Judaic Studies Program

Geography, Discourse, and Social Conversation
An Introduction
by David Robinson, S.J.

When Andy Heinze initially inquired if I would be interested in providing some brief, introductory comments in order to situate the Swig Judaic Studies symposium in the context of a Jesuit, Catholic university, I was delighted at the prospect of welcoming a group of intelligent and questioning thinkers to a discussion of the responses of contemporary Jewish and Christian faith communities to the reality of openly homosexual believers in their midst. My hopes were fully realized in the depth and integrity that marked the panel presentations and in the ensuing conversations with those attending. However, the subsequent rash of responses to my remarks led me to realize the wider dimensions of the issues and ideologies attendant upon public reflection on such a charged topic.

My introductory comments attempted to portray the aspects of Jesuit tradition that have always seemed to poise the Society at the crossroads of significant historical currents in spiritual, sociopolitical, and systemic contexts. In the spiritual realm, I alluded to the Malabar Rites controversy in seventeenth century India. There, the Jesuits were attempting to negotiate a delicate balance between the formal demands of the hierarchy and the indigenous religious practices of local populations in celebrating the sacraments. Attempts to discern the spiritual integrity of the rites led to political complications and conflicts with the church. One of the greatest Jesuit endeavors in enculturation occurred in the so-called Paraguayan Reductions. Working with local populations in an area that included groups from Argentina, Uruguay, and Brazil, as well as Paraguay, Jesuits labored to elicit the finest elements from the admixture of cultural traditions. Efforts at maintaining the social and political integrity of the communities ran afoul of the imperial ambitions of both the Spanish and Portuguese monarchies. The sociopolitical fallout from that period played a significant role in the eventual suppression of the Society.

A third example of the Jesuit inclination to move to the heart of a geography of change can be found in the life of Matteo Ricci, whose prodigious intelligence made him a valued member of the mandarin court of China. Among the governing elite of the country, his knowledge of mathematics, as well as his excellent grasp of Chinese language, literature, and culture, helped him to initiate a dialogue of faith with his hosts. His facility at the systemic level allowed his spiritual integrity to shine forth in a completely foreign environment.

These three models of Jesuit life and practice were held up as representative of an Ignatian propensity to reside at the intersection of culture, faith, and spiritual exploration, whatever the cost in the practical world of politics and ideologies. Therefore, given the charged and personal nature of the current debates regarding homosexual identity and its intersection with Christian community and praxis, I remarked that USF was "absolutely the place" to hold such a conversation.

My statements were not enmeshed in a polemical agenda but merely represented a desire to further conversation in an arena where "rhetoric and conceptual sidebars and traps" had so long derailed us in our efforts to come to clarity and a place of pastoral compassion and community justice. Little did I know that a simple gesture of welcome and introduction would generate interest and response far beyond the confines of the University of San Francisco, or even the State of California.

Indicative of the ideological energies behind discussions of homosexuality and Judeo-Christian community identity was the fallout that occurred during the next month. Within the week, an article appeared in the Archdiocesan newspaper, *Catholic San Francisco*, in which my comments received more press than most of the presenters. The following week an incensed reader of the paper, whose comments seemed to indicate she had not been present at the symposium, lambasted the university and me for flying in the face of contemporary magisterial proclamations on the subject of homosexuality. The presumption seemed to be that the Jesuits and the University of San Francisco had abdicated their roles as moral spokespersons on behalf of Catholic teaching.

In short order, the sound-byte of "this is absolutely the place" had found its way into the news summary of the Department of Communications and Outreach Office of Communications, the Catholic News Service web-site, and *America magazine*. Although the situation carried a certain ironic humor, it began to seem rather like a Patrick Henry moment—a "give me liberty or give me death" outcry on behalf of justice for gays and lesbians in the churches and synagogues. However, the flurry of small-press items generated more than mere pseudo-notoriety. I received messages of gratitude from as far away as Washington and New Jersey. These were letters from gays and lesbians who felt disaffected from a church that had elicited their dedication and then left them feeling less than human in the community of faith. One day, I arrived at the office to find a voice-mail from a psychologist in Los Angeles, who specialized in the issues of gay and lesbian youth and of sexual abuse victims. He was about to participate in the bishops' meeting in Dallas on clerical sexual abuse and wanted to gain some insights into Church views and responses.

I narrate all of these events to show the "lightning-rod" quality of the topic in contemporary Christian and Jewish communities. If a simple gathering of inquiring minds can push media hot-buttons in such a fashion, it seems all the more imperative that the pursuit of reasonable, humane, and spiritually sound conversation continue. Jesuit tradition throughout the centuries has always sought to discern God's presence and activity in every aspect of our being, doing, and thinking. If we are to move beyond the purely polemical and the histrionic in our approaches to compassionate inclusion of homosexual persons in our faith communities, then we must engage one another from a place of deep personal authenticity and mutual respect. Name-calling and clichés are not the answer. The symposium convinced me more than ever that this is absolutely the place, and absolutely the time.

Catholic Thought About Sexual Diversity

by Patricia Beattie Jung

Introduction

There are several relatively new developments in what the Roman Catholic Church officially teaches about homosexuality, but I am sorry to say that as a whole they are not very welcoming. Though my primary focus will be on other—not yet official—developments in Catholic thought, I want to review present church teaching for two reasons. First, few people (including Catholics) know exactly what the church teaches. Second, in an ecumenical and interreligious context, it is sometimes unclear just how representative of a religious community an author's thoughts are. I do not want to equivocate about the fact that the developments I highlight are at the growing edges of the Catholic tradition. What I believe to be genuinely welcoming diverges from and challenges most of what the church officially teaches.

Official Church Teachings

The Catholic Church teaches that all homosexual desires are "objectively disordered." And yet, because sexual orientation is perceived as a relatively stable "given" in our lives, the church teaches that it is not a sin to be gay, lesbian, bisexual, or (by extension) transgendered (hereafter GLBT). It recognizes that "reorientation" is usually not possible and hence does not morally require "reparation therapy." Though sexual orientation is a fundamental dimension of our personality, the church teaches that persons should not be reduced to their sexuality. GLB persons should not conclude that their orientation makes them bad. Nevertheless because such orientations are "disordered," every desire that springs from them is thought of as "occasion of sin."

The Catholic Church teaches that all homosexual activity is "objectively disordered" and commends to gay and lesbian persons total life-long sexual abstinence. Individual culpability for homosexual activity—its sinfulness—can be aggravated or mitigated (even removed altogether), depending on the circumstances, (see the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF), "Letter to the Bishops on the Pastoral Care of Homosexual Persons," 1986).

The Catholic Church teaches that a person's sexual orientation is irrelevant to his or her human dignity and, consequently, to the fundamental human rights that are the corollary of that dignity. Every person has a right to all the conditions essential to the protection and realization of his or her dignity. Because our dignity springs from our being created in the image and likeness of God, the human rights that are its corollary are not something we earn or forfeit by any behavior, sexual or otherwise." The fundamental human rights of homosexual persons must be defended" (see the National Conference of Catholic Bishops, United States Catholic Conference, "Always Our Children," 1997, hereafter AOC).

However, while the right not to be discriminated against is just such a fundamental human right, respect for it does not automatically preempt other obligations. Thus, while the church holds that there is a presumption against discrimination based on sexual orientation, it officially opposes domestic partnership legislation and the licensing of same-sex marriages. (See The Pontifical Council for the Family, "Family, Marriage and De Facto Unions," 2000, hereafter FMU). Similarly, while the church opposes discrimination based on sexual orientation in employment practices, the church teaches that not every instance of discrimination at the workplace is unjust. Indeed, at least some discriminatory practices, the church teaches, are morally required, because "in matters where sexual orientation has a clear relevance, the common good does justify it being taken into account" (AOC).

According to the Vatican, discrimination may be justified specifically in regard to the placement of children in adoption, FMU and foster care, the employment of teachers and coaches, military recruitment and even in regard to housing. (See the CDF, "Some Considerations Concerning the Catholic Response to Legislative Proposals on the Non-Discrimination of Homosexual Persons," 1992.) In a grievous case of scapegoating, in March, 2002 a very influential papal spokesman suggested that perhaps gay men should be banned from the priesthood.¹ Implicit (and unsupported) in all such directives favoring discrimination is the assumption that homosexual people are especially prone to seduce those who are young and vulnerable, to recruit those whose desires may "waiver," or worse, to be abusive sexual predators. Even though there is no evidence for such a stereotype, bishops in the United States remain divided about whether to support legislative efforts to ban discrimination based on orientation.

A normative sexual anthropology frames these teachings. According to it, homosexuality is objectively disordered for two reasons: (1) It does not embody, not even iconically, openness to the human procreative potential; and (2) it draws individuals away from their human potential for an intimate loving relationship. Genuine love is presumed truly accessible only in heterosexual relationships. These two goods—life and love—are seen as inseparably linked in a heterosexual complementarity inscribed in the natural sexual order.

Some Catholics find current church teachings about homosexuality to be compelling. But many others, gay and straight alike, do not. Though clear and authoritative, these teachings simply do not "make sense" to them. This underscores one crucial part of the ethical task, which is the discernment of what is the church's living tradition. Catholics believe what is authentic will cohere with, even be reinforced by insights, not only from the Bible but also from secular disciplines and human experience. Yet instead of providing such confirmation, much wisdom from these other sources of moral wisdom challenges official church teachings.

In light of this, several bishops in the United States (Matthew Clark of Rochester, New York, and Thomas Gumbleton of Detroit, Michigan, to name just two) remind Catholics of the church's official teaching about the primacy of conscience. While the faithful are obligated to wrestle with church teachings as part of their moral formation, individuals must always obey the certain judgment of their consciences.

More Welcoming Developments

Catholics who are contributing to these other, as yet not official, developments in Catholic thought fall broadly into two camps. Some accept as basic the normative sexual anthropology that presently frames church teaching. Others (like myself) argue that human sexuality is more diverse than the present anthropology suggests and that this basic model of sexuality itself needs modification.

Catholics in the first camp agree with the church's account of what is sexually normative but interpret this as an ideal that the faithful are obliged to approximate insofar as possible. This enables them to recognize as morally tolerable some of what falls short of that ideal. They also frequently modify or reject—as neither logically required, nor supported by empirical evidence—many of the public policy recommendations presently taught to be corollaries of this framework. While this is no small matter, it is important to be clear about the limits of this way of thinking. It will never establish homosexual desire as potentially an "occasion of grace," or homosexual relationships as potentially worth celebrating.

In contrast, those in the second camp suggest that sexual diversity (not heterosexual uniformity) is natural in the normative sense. Distinctively Catholic versions of this line of argument focus on the corporate—that is, the biological and communal—significance of sexual diversity. There are a variety of reasons for this emphasis. Let me highlight just one foundation for this approach. In his analysis of the frequently cited prohibitions of male homoerotic behavior found in Leviticus 18 and 20, Catholic biblical scholar Robert Di Vito argues that these judgments rest on gender scripts, which this particular (postexilic) biblical community judged edifying for the community as a whole. Di Vito contends that what made for good sex in antiquity was not a purely private, or even interpersonal, matter. The biblical view of sexuality is that it is a properly public, communal concern.

This dimension of the biblical perspective, many Catholic interpreters concur, is confirmed by other sources of moral wisdom. Thus, the questions surfacing on the growing edges of Catholic thought are three: (1) How does sexual diversity serve the common good? (2) Do only heterosexual partnerships prove communally salutary? and (3) What are the consequences of traditional church teachings for our life together? The pursuit of these three concerns has triggered exciting new and, in my opinion, genuinely welcoming developments in Catholic thought.

Sexual Diversity and the Common Good

If diversity is the Creator's design for sexuality, then according to Catholic anthropological assumptions it should contribute to the common good. Given the traditional reliance on human reason, Catholics expect that data from secular disciplines (as well as experience) will identify and confirm the biological and social purposes of such variation. Catholic theologian and evolutionary psychologist Sidney Callahan has taken up the task of exploring just such questions.²

There is a wide scientific consensus about the facts that humans reproduce heterosexually and that the bonding facilitated by sexual delight supports the child-rearing process, and hence, that some association between sexuality and parenting serves the species. However, it does not follow from this claim to loose association that love-making and baby-making should be connected in each and every sexual act (as taught by the church).

Indeed, there is no basis for the connection between human sexual and reproductive activity to be thought of as inseparable. Biologists have known for over a century that not all coital acts are naturally ordered to procreation.³ Furthermore, it is clear that the periods of infertility associated with heterosexuality are not sufficient in certain environments to the task of suppressing reproduction. In fact, the good of the human species (as well as of other species and the environment as a whole) may be served best by the expression through sexual diversity of more potential for reproductive suppression. The biological potential for variation in the ways sexuality might be socially constructed provides the species with optimal reproductive flexibility.

Additionally, Callahan notes that sexual diversity enables pair bonding apart from reproductive activity and models the potential social significance of such bonds. All sexual relationships—whether gay or straight—can serve the community by providing the partners mutual support and companionship. Sexual partners whether gay or straight—not only can offer their elders nurture but can also offer orphans and children in need of foster care wonderful homes in which to be raised.⁴ As noted in a recent statement of the American Pediatric Association (2002), well-documented empirical studies indicate that sexual orientation is not relevant to the assessment of a couple's or a person's suitability for parenthood.

Official Catholic Church teachings reject such claims about the potential of homosexual partnerships for communal service by arguing that all of them are by definition narcissistic or self-centered. Yet, psychologist Isaiah Crawford has thoroughly reviewed the social scientific literature in this regard.⁵ Research does not support such a stereotype about gay and lesbian relationships. Crawford notes that documented studies suggest gay couples not only are just as intimate but are less deceitful overall with one another than their straight counterparts are. Given the lack of cultural and religious support for sexual exclusivity and steadfastness among queer couples, he interprets their lower level of interest in and success at maintaining faithful relationships as simply extraordinary.

Along with such insights from secular disciplines, many Catholics believe that human experience—queer and straight alike—challenges the church's basic anthropological framework. Catholic moral theologian Cristie Traina recently examined her marriage, and like many in a heterosexual relationship, she finds no necessary or exclusive connection between being open to the possibility of procreation and being fully self-giving.⁶ In her experience, and that of many others, the mutual self-giving of persons that is conjugal love does not always include the gift of one's capacity for procreation, because fertility does not always accompany a woman's experience of sexual embodiment. Further, notes

this mother of three, many happily married heterosexual couples experience traditional gender differences as hardly relevant to their experience of conjugal complementarity.

Salutary Diversity

Some Catholic theologians now question whether biblical narratives actually testify that heterosexuality is the Creator's uniform sexual design and diversity a consequence of sin. Some for example are exploring whether the creation accounts in Genesis 1–3 could be compatible with a claim that sexual diversity is anthropologically normative.⁷ The point of these inquiries is not to ignore the celebration of heterosexuality in the Bible or to imply that the Bible portrays human sexuality as diverse. Rather, they claim only that unbiased biblical scholarship does not establish heterosexuality as exclusively normative.

Dangerous Consequences

Finally, like other exegetes many Catholic biblical scholars point out how little (relatively speaking) is said about same sex behavior in the Bible overall. They note how—from a literary perspective—many of the texts frequently debated in this regard are not about sexuality at all and that the historical context of these few passages is quite distant from our own. All this poses serious questions about the applicability of biblical perspectives to the issues we debate today. However some biblical scholars suggest that this emphasis—on the discontinuity between the past and the present—needs to be qualified. Otherwise, it will serve not only to trivialize the Bible as a source of moral insight for us, but also perhaps prove dangerous.

The work of Catholic biblical scholar Mary Rose D'Angelo is especially worth considering in this regard.⁸ She argues that we must investigate not only the Bible's distance from us, but also its continuity—for good and ill—with what is happening in the present. She contends that traditional interpretations of the Bible are clearly implicated in gay bashing and other hate crimes. As she explains them, the Bible's condemnation of same-sex activity is rooted in an ancient association of male homoeroticism with the humiliation and submission normally reserved for women and the conquered in patriarchal societies. Now, just as then, many people find homoerotic activity problematic precisely because it challenges the domination and privilege associated in the Bible with being "a real man." While D'Angelo does not argue that phobic or violent responses to what is queer began in the scriptures, she does claim that many such attitudes and practices are still sanctified from the pulpit.

Such biblical testimonies—like many of those that reinforce slavery—should not be ignored but interpreted anew as morally suspect. Otherwise, tradition and scripture will continue to reinforce in each other a moral error of staggering proportion. Traditional biblical interpretations of homoeroticism need to be challenged. Catholic biblical scholar Luke T. Johnson argues that God invites the church to precisely this task and that this is itself a matter of biblical testimony.⁹ The new word of welcome for foreigners developed in Third Isaiah, along with other new proclamations made by Jesus, Peter, and Paul, provides the

church with biblical precedents for such reinterpretation. In their context these were quite challenging. The task of moral discernment requires that we continue to welcome analogous developments at the growing edges of our tradition today.

NOTES

¹ On March 3, 2002, papal spokesperson, Joachim Navarro-Valls, indicated that the church is considering measures to screen out and prevent gay men from being ordained to the priesthood. In February 2001 it was reported that the Vatican, at the request of the U.S. bishops, had just completed a yearlong study of whether to issue guidelines on the issue of homosexual candidates for the priesthood. At that time, Archbishop Tarcisio Bertone (secretary for the Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith and Archbishop emeriti of Vercelli) said the Vatican considered the issue "a very serious problem and is determined to take steps to correct it." No formal guidelines have been published.

² Sidney Callahan, "Homosexuality, Moral Theology and Scientific Evidence," *Sexual Diversity and Catholicism: Toward the Development of Moral Theology* edited by Patricia Beattie Jung with Joseph Andrew Coray (Collegeville, Minn: The Liturgical Press, 2001) 201-215.

³ Among animals, human sexuality is fairly unique. Women are for the most part biologically sterile during most of our potentially reproductive years and, of course, for the entirety of our postmenopausal lives. Yet women remain not only sexually receptive but active throughout their adult life. This is quite different from the male experience of sexuality wherein orgasm is in each and every instance potentially reproductive. There is no good reason to make male experience normative for what is human.

⁴ This is not a completely new idea to Catholicism. Indeed same-sex religious orders were among the first institutions in the Christian West to offer shelter, and religious as well as moral formation, to abandoned and otherwise needy children. See *The Kindness of Strangers* by John Boswell (New York: Pantheon Books, 1988).

⁵ Isaiah Crawford and Brian D. Zamboni, "Informing the Debate on Homosexuality: The Behavioral Sciences and the Church," *Sexual Diversity and Catholicism*, *Ibid.*, 216-251.

⁶ Cristina L. H. Traina, "Papal Ideals, Marital Realities: One View from the Ground," *Ibid.*, 269-288.

⁷ Everyone agrees that in Genesis 1 sexual differentiation is narratively associated with procreation. But this narrative association does not establish openness to procreancy as either the only, or even a necessary, purpose of sexual activity. Though English translations make it difficult for us to hear, careful attention to the narrative as a whole makes it clear that "be fruitful and multiply" is part of God's blessing, not a command. Similarly, Genesis 2 clearly associates heterosexual desire with the desire for companionship. But such an association does not establish that only heterosexuality can be normative. Indeed, on the contrary, in the narrative it is the couple's similarity that makes their loving intimacy possible. It is their common humanity—their sharing of the same flesh, the fact that Eve is "bone of my bones..."—that makes their "one flesh" experience possible.

In Genesis 3, broken experiences of sexual desire are associated with human peril, but notice what the narrative explicitly identifies with lust. The eroticizing of domination and the pain and danger of childbirth are portrayed as paradigmatic examples of the consequences of sin, not same-sex behavior.

The point here is neither to deny the biblical affirmation of heterosexual love found in the opening chapters of Genesis nor to claim that these biblical texts help us make sense out of homosexual love, precisely as it is sexual. The point is only that these narratives are not necessarily incompatible with the affirmation of homosexual love.

⁸ Mary Rose D'Angelo, "Perfect Fear Casteth Out Love: Reading, Citing and Rape," *Sexual Diversity and Catholicism*, *Op. Cit.*, 175-200.

⁹ Luke T. Johnson, "Debate and Discernment," *Commonweal* 121/2 (January 28, 1994).

A Protestant Perspective

by Jeffrey S. Siker

Let me begin by noting that although I've been asked to speak about new approaches to homosexuality within the Protestant tradition, I am mindful of my Jewish father and my Roman Catholic mother, who somehow gave birth to a son who grew up to be a Presbyterian minister who teaches about early Jewish/Christian relations at a Roman Catholic university. My hope is that the more we talk with each other across religious traditions, the more progress we will make towards an inclusive vision of gay and lesbian people within our respective faith communities. I think that conversing across traditions will help us to think and to live more creatively within our own tradition. I should also add at the outset that I speak as a straight white man who over the last decade has tried to persuade my mostly heterosexual church, among others, to welcome homosexual persons into the community of faith. So part of what I want to tell you today is what I say to the church in seeking a more inclusive vision. I do not speak as a representative of gay and lesbian Christians; I would not presume to do so. Indeed, my hope is that the more we engage our faith communities the more open they will be to hearing the voices of gay and lesbian people.

Before turning to new approaches within the Protestant tradition, it might be helpful to reflect on how and why the old approaches of various Protestant traditions have made it so difficult to offer genuine inclusion of gay and lesbian people of faith. In my view, the central stumbling block has been, and continues to be, the role of traditional biblical interpretation within the various Protestant denominations. The Bible serves as the springboard for virtually all discussions of homosexuality within Protestant churches. Conservative voices within the churches have long argued that the will of God revealed in the Bible indicates that God intends humans to live in monogamous heterosexual marriages. Six biblical passages have been the primary proof-texts used to argue against inclusion of homosexual people, three from the Jewish scriptures and three from the New Testament: the creation story in Genesis 1-2, the story of Sodom and Gomorrah from Genesis 19, the prohibitions in Leviticus 18 and 20, and the three Pauline statements found in Romans 1, 1 Corinthians 6, and 1 Timothy 1. The collective testimony of scripture has traditionally been interpreted as clearly articulating that homosexuality is a sinful violation of God's created natural order.

The problem, of course, is that in the contemporary debate over homosexuality people have often engaged in surface readings of the Bible that tend to neglect several key issues, three of which I'd like to name here. First, people often do not give adequate attention to the historical and cultural contexts that helped to shape the biblical writings themselves. To borrow a phrase from Paul in 2 Corinthians, we need to remember that this treasure of biblical witnesses comes to us in earthen vessels. The Bible is a human expression of people of faith trying to give voice to what they think God is doing in their midst. When we fail to pay sufficient attention to the various contexts that shaped the world of the biblical writers, we are not ourselves being faithful to the voices they express.

Second, people often do not reflect critically on the modern cultural contexts out of which we seek to make sense of what the Bible has to say. We have some very different presuppositions and understandings about how the world works and about what it means to live faithfully than did the biblical writers. We can see this, for example, when we compare various biblical understandings about the status and role of women as subordinate to men in faith and society with our own contemporary and rather different understandings of women as equal to men in faith and society. We also have some important and different understandings about what counts as natural or unnatural than did the biblical writers. Such differences make it important for us to be self-conscious about the conversations we have between the faithful witness of the ancient biblical writers and the faithful witness of the contemporary church. We also need to be attentive to the many interpretive voices over the centuries that have shaped the traditions connecting our worlds to the biblical worlds.

This leads to a third observation. People often read the Bible as if it speaks for itself, as if we are not always and constantly engaged in a process of interpretation, indeed of competing interpretations. Perhaps this reality is nowhere better seen than in how people use bits and pieces of the Bible as placards and slogans with which to bash gay and lesbian people. The danger is when we naively blend our world with the worlds of the biblical authors. For example, if we read a modern translation of 1 Corinthians 6 that condemns "homosexual perverts" without sufficient awareness of the translation issues involved, we can easily be misled into interpreting the passage as condemning all forms of homosexual expression. If we read such a passage without the awareness that the very term homosexual goes back only to the nineteenth century, or without knowing that the apostle Paul had no conception of sexual orientation in the way that we do today, then we run the risk of reading our world back into the world Paul was originally addressing. And so too often people of faith can anachronistically blur the world of ancient Israel or of early Christianity with the contemporary world in which we live and breathe.

Fortunately, with a growing emphasis on both ancient and modern contextual readings of the biblical accounts, traditional interpretations of the Bible have been increasingly challenged. This is not new in the academy, but it is still new in the church. For example, it is now commonly acknowledged that the story of Sodom and Gomorrah has to do with sexual violence and inhospitality rather than homosexuality per se. Similarly, the prohibitions from Leviticus have been interpreted within the literary and historical context of ancient Israel's religious and political fights with other cultures, especially in light of cultic prostitution. An increasing number of interpreters of the apostle Paul have called attention to Paul's Greco-Roman cultural context, in which pederasty and prostitution appear to have been the primary models of homoerotic expression in view. This means that the only forms of homosexual expression that are reflected in the Bible involve sexual exploitation and sexual violence, as opposed to forms of homosexual expression within the context of loving and committed relationships that we know and applaud today.

This is not to say that we should dismiss the biblical witness as outdated and irrelevant. Far from it. It is to say that serious and faithful attention to the biblical witness has to mean that we read the Bible in context, just as we read our own world today in context. If we do that, then the conversations we can have with the biblical writers can be exceedingly rich and meaningful indeed. For example, interpreters have called increasing attention to the significant emphasis in many biblical passages on the role of human experience. The Bible itself encourages us to use our reason and experience to reflect on our faith traditions. It is precisely because of how the church has experienced the faithful presence of gay and lesbian people that over the last generation most Protestant denominations have taken seriously the call to reconsider traditional teachings on homosexuality. Such reconsideration shows a conscious awareness in the Protestant tradition that the church is always in the process of reforming. In the United States, for example, the United Methodist Church, the Presbyterian Church, the United Church of Christ, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, and the Episcopal Church have all engaged in multiyear studies of how to respond to the presence of gay and lesbian Christians in their congregations and in their church leadership. Such deliberations have certainly led to deep divisions in each of these denominations, as year after year some church leaders call for the church to respond to the leading of God's Spirit and to be more inclusive of gay and lesbian Christians, while others call just as strongly for the church to take a firm stand against endorsing any form of homosexual expression, especially by ordained clergy.

In the Protestant tradition ordination has been the symbolic issue in the debate over including openly gay and lesbian Christians. Protestant clergy are typically married, and this reality automatically raises the question of how gay or lesbian couples in same-sex unions serve as models for Christian marriage, which has traditionally been envisioned in exclusively heterosexual terms. This focus on ordination in the Protestant tradition stands in contrast to the Roman Catholic tradition, where the combination of a celibate priesthood and the traditional centrality of procreation in marriage has meant that debate over the inclusion of gay and lesbian Christians has been shaped in somewhat different ways. But within both Protestant and Catholic traditions, those seeking inclusion of gay and lesbian Christians in the church have emphasized sexual orientation as a natural God-given predisposition that individuals discover as they mature, whether it is heterosexual or homosexual. Those seeking to uphold traditional sanctions against homosexuality have emphasized centuries of church teachings against same-sex practices and, though not seeing homosexual orientation itself as a matter of personal sin, they have argued that such an orientation is a distortion of God's creative purposes. From this perspective homosexual persons can be welcomed into the church, but are called to abstain from same-sex relations.

Perhaps the most important and difficult component to factor into Protestant attitudes towards homosexuality involves the ways people have experienced the presence of gay and lesbian Christians in the various denominations. The "coming out" of many prominent Protestant church leaders as gay/lesbian or bisexual

persons has forced churches to respond to the tension created by their effective ministries in light of traditional church teaching against homosexuality. The personal witness of successful and capable gay/lesbian Christian leaders has been a powerful presence that has convinced many to be more accepting of these leaders in particular and to encourage the larger society to be more accepting of homosexual persons in general. At the same time, the traditional Protestant rejection of homosexuality in official statements and policies has led many gay and lesbian Christians to leave the church completely or to find local congregations that have publicly embraced an inclusive attitude towards gay and lesbian people. Overall, Protestant churches have often been of two minds in their approach to gay and lesbian Christians. On the one hand, many denominations have passed binding resolutions ruling against the ordination of noncelibate gay/lesbian Christians and against same-sex unions. On the other hand, ironically, most denominations have also passed resolutions calling on elected government officials to pass legislation that makes discrimination against homosexual people illegal. At the same time many Protestant churches seek to be inclusive of gay and lesbian people in practice, if not in policy.

Let me illustrate some of the tensions Protestant churches have experienced by reflecting on my own tradition, the Presbyterian Church, USA. In 1978 the Presbyterian Church issued a ruling that it labeled the "definitive guidance" of the General Assembly (the national level of the church's structure). The General Assembly ruled against the ordination of gay and lesbian people who engaged in homosexual practice. Fifteen years later, in 1993, the Presbyterian General Assembly affirmed this ban on the ordination of gays and lesbians as the "authoritative interpretation" of the church's constitution, but at the same time called for greater understanding and respect for gay and lesbian people. A few years later, in 1997, by a 3-2 margin the Presbyterian Church voted to add what is known as Amendment B to its Book of Order, part of the governing constitution of the church. This amendment placed in the church's constitution an explicit ban on ordaining openly gay and lesbian people. But at last year's 2001 meeting, the Presbyterian General Assembly voted by a 3-2 margin to delete this ban from the constitution, pending approval from the regional groupings of individual churches known as Presbyteries. They also voted and ruled that the "definitive guidance" and "authoritative interpretation" banning ordination of gay and lesbian people was of "no further force or effect." So you can see that the church has gone back and forth on this matter over the years. In February of 2002, just a couple of months ago, the various Presbyteries voted by a roughly 2-1 margin to defeat the action of the 2001 General Assembly, and so in effect have kept the ban on the ordination of gay and lesbian leaders. (The Presbytery of San Francisco voted to remove the ban.)

In my home Presbytery in Los Angeles, when we voted on this amendment in February, the final vote was 100 in favor of keeping the ban on ordination and 99 in favor of removing the ban. A few years ago when we had a similar vote, it was a tie. So back and forth we go, and not only in the Presbyterian Church. Protestant churches will continue to be divided, and we will continue to argue

both sides. We've been at this kind of debate for about 25 years now, a relatively short time in the life of the church, even though it feels at times we've been fighting this battle for much longer. So though we get frustrated, we'll press ahead because that's where God's Spirit is leading us. Despite official denominational policies within the Protestant tradition, many local congregations continue to welcome gay and lesbian Christians. Despite the Bible-thumping of those opposed to such inclusion, many gay and lesbian pastors continue to be engaged in effective ministry—drawing all the while on the same Bible's hopeful message of the loving justice and grace of God. Despite the ebbs and flows of church politics, of successes and setbacks, I remain hopeful and confident that eventually and inevitably the church will continue to change more and more into an inclusive community of faith for gay and lesbian people.

The debate will continue, because God's Spirit is empowering the lives of God's people, whether they are gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgendered, or straight. In closing, I want to share with you one particular debate that has stuck with me. Several years ago I was invited along with Marty Soards (a professor of biblical studies at Louisville Presbyterian Seminary) to give parallel presentations on the Bible and homosexuality before the General Assembly executive council of the Presbyterian Church. I was arguing for full inclusion of gay and lesbian Christians in our midst, while Marty presented the traditional position against such full inclusion. At the end of our presentations we were asked if we had any questions for each other. Marty had concluded his presentation by saying that at present he saw no evidence that should persuade the church to change its historic stance against the ordination of gay and lesbian pastors and the church's stance against same-sex unions. And so when it was my turn to ask a question, I asked him this question: What would count as valid evidence that would compel the church to change its stance, and how would he recognize it if he saw it? He responded that he wasn't exactly sure what would count as evidence, but that he was sure he would recognize it if he saw it. My response to him, and my continued response to our church is that the Spirit of God has given us plenty of evidence in the effective lives and ministries of gay and lesbian Christians throughout the church and that for some time now we've been calling on the church as a whole to recognize and to welcome the faithful lives of such openly gay and lesbian Christians.

I see the gathering here today as another hopeful sign that people of faith across various traditions have indeed recognized the Spirit of God working in and through the faithful lives of gay and lesbian people. May we press ahead in God's Spirit and continue to welcome to our communities of faith our gay and lesbian brothers and sisters.

Judaism and Homosexuality

by Elliot N. Dorff

Of the four movements in modern Judaism—Orthodox, Conservative, Reconstructionist, and Reform—it is only within the Conservative movement that debate on issues of homosexuality continues unabated. The other movements have taken their stands long ago.

The Orthodox stand solidly against any form of homosexual sex. The most liberal among Orthodox rabbis point out that while homosexual sex remains prohibited—indeed, an "abomination," in the words of Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13—Jews who violate that prohibition remain Jews. They are just sinning Jews—but, of course, we are all sinning Jews. Nobody is perfect; nobody abides by all of the commandments flawlessly. That is why we ask God's forgiveness three times each day in our prayers, and that is why we have the High Holy Day season to focus on repentance and forgiveness. As an "abomination," though, homosexual sex happens to be a particularly egregious violation. Therefore those who find themselves with homoerotic tendencies should seek to get help to reverse that, if possible, and have heterosexual sex within marriage. Those who cannot do that should abstain from sex altogether.

Of course, among the Orthodox, as among every group, the official policy does not always correspond with reality. A recent magazine article and a recent film speak openly about gays and lesbians who are Orthodox Jews, and there is an organization of gay and lesbian graduates of Orthodox yeshivot (day schools) and even two websites for people who find themselves to be both Orthodox and gay.¹ All of this, of course, is a source of consternation among the Orthodox leadership, for in theory no such things should exist. The phenomenon of Orthodox gays and lesbians is also a source of consternation to the gays and lesbians themselves, for their very existence is an anathema—and openly proclaimed as such—in the synagogues they love and in the form of Jewish belief and practice they cherish. That has led a high percentage of them to leave Orthodoxy, albeit with misgivings. Those who stay either hide their homosexual identity or find the strength to live with the inherent contradiction and the constant slurs they experience.

On the other end of the spectrum, the Reform movement—and the small Reconstructionist movement (representing about 2 percent of America's affiliated Jews)—also made their decisions about this matter long ago. Already in 1973 the synagogue arm of the Reform movement opened its ranks to synagogues with specific outreach to gays and lesbians when it accepted such a synagogue, Beit Hayyim Hadashim in Los Angeles, as a member. That did not come without controversy; indeed, a heated symposium among some of the rabbis of the movement appeared in their journal, the CCAR (Central Conference of American Rabbis) Journal. In the early 1980s, the Reconstructionist seminary, after some heated discussions of its own, accepted homosexuals to its rabbinical program, and Hebrew Union College, the seminary of the Reform movement, did likewise in the late 1980s. All of these actions, of course, do not mean that homophobia

is absent in these movements and that gays and lesbians ordained by these institutions find rabbinic positions as easily as their straight colleagues. Still, these movements both officially and largely in practice have decided that here, as often, they will not see traditional Jewish law as binding and will act instead on their current moral convictions.

It is within the Conservative movement that the debate continues. In part, that is to be expected just by virtue of the fact that the Conservative movement is the one in the middle, feeling the pulls of both sides. When one digs deeper, one finds ideological reasons for the ambivalence. On the one hand, Conservative ideology states that Jewish law is binding, and so the verses in Leviticus cannot easily be dismissed. Judaism, of course, is based not only on the Torah but on the way the rabbis over the generations have interpreted and applied it, and so many verses in the Torah no longer apply in their straightforward meaning.² Indeed, some, like the law stating that a "stubborn and rebellious son" is to be executed and that the death penalty is to be applied for a whole gamut of crimes have been effectively read out of existence through rabbinic restrictions on their meaning and applicability,³ and all biblical laws are subject to the specific scope and meaning that the rabbis gave them. In this case, however, the rabbis interpreted the verses in Leviticus to apply to all male homosexual sex, regardless of form or context, and the rabbis expanded this prohibition to apply to lesbians as well.⁴ Thus there is not much "wiggle room" in the tradition itself to produce a liberal stance on homosexual sex.

On the other hand, though, unlike the Orthodox, Conservative Jews study the Jewish tradition—including its laws—in their historical context. Sometimes the scientific, social, economic, or moral conditions are relatively different from what they were when a particular law, judicial ruling, or custom became normative. In some cases the rabbis of the current generation find those differences to be sufficient to warrant a different ruling. "The times have changed" has been used long before the modern, Conservative movement to justify changes in the law, but the Conservative movement has shown more willingness than the Orthodox to use that traditional rationale for change in such matters as the place of women in Jewish liturgy and law and in applying Jewish law to modern medical technologies. Whether liberal, contemporary, moral evaluations of homosexuality in some parts of American society should influence Jewish law as we practice it in our time as well is, to put it mildly, an issue on which the Conservative movement has agreed to disagree.

The situation is not quite as chaotic as the last paragraph might suggest. A resolution adopted in May 1990 by the Rabbinical Assembly, the organization of Conservative rabbis, and virtually the same resolution adopted in November 1991 by the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism stated the points in which the movement is pretty much at one.⁵

Gay and Lesbian Jews

WHEREAS Judaism affirms that the Divine image reflected by every human being must always be cherished and affirmed, and

WHEREAS Jews have always been sensitive to the impact of official and unofficial prejudice and discrimination, wherever directed, and

WHEREAS gay and lesbian Jews have experienced not only the constant threats of physical violence and homophobic rejection, but also the pains of anti-Semitism known to all Jews and, additionally, a sense of painful alienation from our own religious institutions, and

WHEREAS the extended families of gay and lesbian Jews are often members of our congregations who live with concern for the safety, health, and well-being of their children, and

WHEREAS the AIDS crisis has deeply exacerbated the anxiety and suffering of this community of Jews who need in their lives the compassionate concern and support mandated by Jewish tradition,

THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED that we, The Rabbinical Assembly [or the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism], while affirming our traditions prescription for heterosexuality,

- 1) Support full civil equality for gays and lesbians in our national life, and
- 2) Deplore the violence against gays and lesbians in our society, and
- 3) Reiterate that, as are all Jews, gay men and lesbians are welcome as members in our congregations, and
- 4) Call upon our synagogues and the arms of our movement to increase our awareness, understanding and concern for our fellow Jews who are gay and lesbian.

The Conservative Movement, then, as a movement, stands on record for full civil rights for gays and lesbians and for protection from attack and discrimination. It also officially welcomes gays and lesbians, as it welcomes all Jews, to Conservative congregations. Serious disagreement continues within the movement, however, on two issues: admission of gays and lesbians to rabbinical and cantorial schools, and the advisability of creating and using some kind of commitment ceremony for gay or lesbian couples. The very name of such ceremonies is a matter at issue. Options include "commitment ceremony," brit re'im (covenant of friends) or brit re'im ha-ahuvim (covenant of loving friends), based on the description of the couple in the seven blessings for a heterosexual marriage; and marriage or the Hebrew equivalents, kiddushin (betrothal) and nisu'in (marriage). The liturgy for such ceremonies is also at issue, ranging from ceremonies very close to Jewish marriage rites to those very different from that.

While the Conservative movement at this writing officially endorses neither ordination nor commitment ceremonies, some Conservative rabbis on their own

authority as rabbis have performed ceremonies joining same-sex couples, and the Conservative Movement's Committee on Jewish Law and Standards has deferred any further action on this question until it can learn from a longer span of experience with such ceremonies. Moreover, some openly gay and lesbian rabbis serve in a variety of posts within the synagogues and schools of the Conservative Movement. Thus the debate goes on.

When the Committee on Jewish Law and Standards extensively debated homosexuality in 1991–92, I suggested that this matter is, at least to some extent, a generational matter. I personally never heard of the word homosexual, let alone gay or lesbian as I was growing up in the 1950s. In my freshman year of college (1961) one of the books we read as part of a required great books course was *Plato's Symposium*, in which Socrates lauds homosexual sex between a master and student as an appropriate expression of that relationship. We tittered about that for two days without serious discussion about homosexuality and then moved on to the next book on the syllabus.

It was not until 1973 that I next was confronted with this topic. I was already teaching at the University of Judaism, and an old camp friend who had become a rabbi of a synagogue in Cleveland called. He told me that a fellow who had been a member of his congregation, regional president of United Synagogue Youth, and then a student at the Joint Program between Columbia University and the Jewish Theological Seminary of America had come out as a gay man during the spring of his sophomore year, had been shunned by the Seminary community at that time, and had transferred to UCLA. The rabbi asked me to meet with this young man just to reassure him that people in the Jewish community still cared about him. When I did that, I experienced the first and only time that I felt genuinely embarrassed by my tradition. All I knew about Judaism and homosexuality was the verses in Leviticus, but he, for understandable reasons, had done considerable research on the topic as it had been treated in the later Jewish tradition. He also described to me what it was like being a committed Jew and yet condemned by his own tradition. I do not know what happened to him, and I hope that in the three hours we spent that afternoon I at least conveyed a sense of sympathy and support, but I am afraid that I was dumbfounded by what he told me and did not have much to say to allay his feelings of rejection by his own tradition.

Because I specialize in bioethics, when the AIDS virus was identified in 1981, I found myself on an AIDS task force at UCLA Medical Center. Since the disease as it first manifested itself in North America disproportionately infected gay men, I came to know a number of gays during those years and ultimately served on the board of directors of *Nehamah: The Jewish AIDS Project of Los Angeles*. It is hard to fear or hate a group of people when you get to know them and discover that, as a group, they are just as intelligent, moral, and Jewishly committed as straight Jews are.

In the meantime, I noticed that my teenage children in the 1980s had a very different experience with this whole topic than the one that I had had. They knew a number of openly gay classmates at school, and it did not seem to faze them.

Their attitude was simple: some people are straight, and some are gay, much the same as the fact that some people have blue eyes and others have brown eyes. They just took it, in other words, as a fact of life.

It was right in the middle of the four meetings of the Committee on Jewish Law and Standards—in December 1992—that our daughter told my wife and me that she is a lesbian. As a graduate student in the midst of a doctoral program in psychology, she knew how to present this well—in a calm way, with a description of how she gradually came to know this about herself lest we think that she was jumping to conclusions, with openness to all of our questions, and with some books for us to read. I was very glad then that I had done some serious thinking about this issue before she told us; I honestly do not know how well I would have reacted without that previous experience and thinking. I am also glad that I had formulated my stance on the matter before she came out to us so that I could rest assured in my own mind that my stance was not just a case of special pleading. Over the years since then, what I have learned from her and from many other gays and lesbians has only added to the pool of evidence for the liberal stance that I have taken on this issue. Indeed, it is precisely the testimony of gays and lesbians themselves that convinced me in the first place, and now I have my own experience as a parent of a lesbian to add to what I have heard from others.

Even some of my rabbinic colleagues who have taken a more traditional stance on this issue have told me that their own children see the matter very differently. The science on the etiology of homosexuality is still soft; the most reliable evidence still comes from homosexual's themselves. That evidence is unquestionably reliable because no sane person would intentionally subject himself or herself to the discrimination that contemporary society still heaps upon homosexuals. The only evidence that appears to be quite definite, as affirmed now for close to thirty years by the American Psychiatric Association, is that psychiatric interventions to try to change a homosexual's sexual orientation not only do not work; they are actually harmful, making the homosexual feel even worse about herself or himself and contributing to the horrendous statistics of suicide among homosexuals.

Aristotle long ago pointed out that it is folly to seek certainty in those areas where certainty cannot reasonably be expected.⁶ So as the science develops, perhaps the proper stance at this time is precisely what the Conservative movement has taken—namely, to affirm our commitment to the tradition while at the same time recognizing that as the scientific studies and personal anecdotes increase, we should be continually open to reevaluating the traditional position. In the meantime, even though I have been in the forefront in arguing for liberalization of our policy on commitment ceremonies (marriages) and ordination, this Conservative rabbi thinks that the current Conservative position is correct for its time and audience in not disallowing either the traditional stance or the liberal one, enabling all of us to continue the discussion with respect as we agree to disagree.

NOTES

¹ Naomi Grossman, "The Gay Orthodox Underground," *Moment Magazine*, April 2001. The movie is *Trembling Before God*. The organization referred to is the Gay and Lesbian Yeshiva Day School Alumni Association (GLYDSA). The websites are www.glydsa.com and www.orthogays.com.

² For a description of the rabbinic process and the justifications for rabbinic authority to determine the meaning and scope of biblical texts, see Elliot N. Dorff and Arthur Rosett, *A Living Tree: The Roots and Growth of Jewish Law* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988), chapters 4–6.

³ The biblical laws on the stubborn and rebellious son: Deuteronomy 21:18–21. After restricting the meaning and applicability of this law in numerous ways, the Talmud itself says that the "stubborn and rebellious son" referred to by the Torah "never was and never will be!" See Babylonian Talmud, *Sanhedrin* 71a. After placing a host of evidentiary restrictions on the death penalty, the mishnah ultimately states that a court that fulfilled all these rules and issued a capital sentence once in seven years was a "bloody court," and there are those who apply that description to a court that decrees a capital sentence once in 70 years. Mishnah, *Makkot* 1:10. On the other hand, the Rabbis also had the authority to add substantially to the Torah's laws, and they did just that, for example, with regard to Sabbath laws—so much so that they themselves say that "The laws of the Sabbath...are like mountains hanging by a hair, for they consist of little Bible and many laws." Mishnah, *Haggigah* 1:8.

⁴ The Rabbis' prohibition of lesbian sex: *Sifra*, "Aharei Mot," 9:5 on Leviticus 18:3. See B. Yevamot 76a, where Rav Huna categorizes lesbian relations as biblically forbidden intercourse and Rav instead sees such relations as "simple lewdness" and therefore only rabbinically forbidden, so that a lesbian would still be eligible to marry a *kohen* (priest, descendant of Aaron). The rabbis' prohibition of all gay sex: Mishnah, *Sanhedrin* 7:4; Babylonian Talmud, *Sanhedrin* 54a; Maimonides' *Mishneh Torah* 1:14.

⁵ The discussion began in the mid-1980s, and it evolved into the resolution of the Rabbinical Assembly quoted here in May 1990. A similar, subsequent resolution was adopted in November 1991 by the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism, the Conservative Movement's synagogue arm. The United Synagogue resolution uses the same language as the Rabbinical Assembly resolution that preceded it, but it leaves out the fifth Whereas clause and the fourth resolution of the Rabbinical Assembly version. Still, the substance and actual wording of the bulk of the United Synagogue resolution are the same as the fuller, Rabbinical Assembly version reproduced here from 1990 *Rabbinical Assembly Proceedings* (New York: Rabbinical Assembly, 1990), 275.)

⁶ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book I, Chapter 3, 1094b12–28: "Our discussion will be adequate if it has as much clearness as the subject matter admits of, for precision is not to be sought for alike in all discussions, any more than in all the products of the crafts. Now fine and just actions, which political science investigates, admits of much variety and fluctuation of opinion, so that they may be thought to exist only by convention, and not by nature. And goods also give rise to a similar fluctuation because they bring harm to many people; for before now men have been undone by reason of their wealth, and others by reason of their courage. We must be content, then, in speaking of such subjects and with such premises to indicate the truth roughly and in outline, and in speaking about things, which are only for the most part true and with premises of the same kind to reach conclusions that are not better. In the same spirit, therefore, should each type of statement be received; for it is the mark of an educated man to look for precision in each class of things just so far as the nature of the subject admits; it is evidently equally foolish to accept probably reasoning from a mathematician and to demand from a rhetorician scientific proofs."

New Christian Understandings of Same-Gender Sexuality

By Frederick Houk Borsch

New understandings of same-gender sexuality and the welcome acceptance of gay and lesbian persons have been much discussed and at times hotly debated issues in many Christian churches in recent years. They are best viewed as part of a larger discussion regarding the nature and purpose of human sexuality involving marriage and family, divorce and remarriage, contraception, a variety of technologically assisted methods of conception and childbearing, and population issues. I will begin with a brief overview of the concerns that are presented as reasons for the nonacceptance or legitimization of same-gender sexual activity and then reflect on some of the new understandings, especially in the Episcopal Church, and how and why my own views have changed.

It is often noted that there are only five or so references dealing directly with same-gender sexual activity in the Bible and that their main concerns may be with cult prostitution, wrong worship, or gender-role confusion. There are no words of Jesus on the issue. Nonetheless, the few references are uniformly negative, and there are no exceptions or positive examples. The relatively low level of interest in homosexuality, it is sometimes argued, shows that the Bible as a whole views the matter with relative indifference. It is probable, however, when taken along with a story like that involving the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah (Genesis 19:19–29, although the main concern here is with inhospitality and violence), that homosexual activity was generally disapproved of in the biblical cultures, much as it was in the society in which I was raised, and still is not accepted in a number of societies today. When set over against normative practice and the Genesis creation stories ("male and female God made them,") homosexuality would have been viewed as nonnormal, not natural, and nonprocreative. To the extent that a male partner would experience himself in a submissive "feminized" role, there was also, it was thought, gender-role confusion. In later periods, there was a rejection of the Hellenistic practice of pederasty involving sexual activity between older and younger males. Although the various Christian denominations use and interpret the scriptures somewhat differently, for many of them any acceptance of homosexual practice would seem to question this overall perspective and the authority of scripture. Indeed, taken along with the lack of any clearly identifiable Christian tradition to the contrary, this would be the main concern for a number of Christians: that is, to offer any acceptance of same-gender sexuality would be to undermine the authority of the Bible and its traditional interpretation.

A more generally understood natural theology is seen to disallow homosexual practice as well. This more generalized perspective is likely also operative for a number of people who would not identify themselves as formally religious. God and/or nature made sexuality for a purpose. Male and female sexual organs are made for that purpose. Men and women, of course, may engage in sexual activity without this purpose in mind, but acts that do not at least simulate this purpose are seen as unnatural. In Roman Catholic theology this "iconic" under-

standing of human sexuality is particularly important. Any sexual practice that does not follow or that gets in the way of this "iconic" nature of sexuality is aesthetically as well as morally disordered and illicit. It is probably true, for at least some people, that same-gender sexuality seems threatening to the idea of a natural order and the understanding of God as creator or even of an ordering God.

Other more social and ethical concerns are voiced. Male homosexual practice in particular threatens the stability of the family and societal values. Youngsters who are uncertain of their sexuality may associate with the wrong role models (as teachers, clergy, scoutmasters, other professional people) and so be prodded into homosexual activity. Parents of both boys and girls may harbor a worry that their children won't marry and themselves have children. Homosexuality is sometimes seen as linked with pedophilia or at least with sex between older men and teenage males. All sexual activity, but particularly non-monogamous sex, risks the spread of infection and disease. The frequency of male homosexual promiscuity, apart from the more relational and "settling" effects of female sexuality, is seen as a particular danger.

Along with a number of other Christians, I have been led to a reconsideration of all these concerns and issues. The primary reasons for this reconsideration have been pastoral and personal; that is, it has been about persons. It is not that the issues are not of importance, but the consideration of them must be guided, I believe, by pastoral experience and human interaction. Christian thought and wisdom are at their best when a pastorally informed theology is kept foremost.

For almost forty years, I have had esteemed friends who I came to understand were gay or lesbian. They have been doctors, teachers, environmentalists, cooks, clergy, businessmen and women. A number have been church members. One is godfather to one of my three sons. Some would have nothing to do with church life because of their sense of strong rejection. They experienced discrimination from the churches and in society. For others, who wanted to live as worshipping and believing Christians, there was a long history of forms of "don't ask, don't tell"—not least among those who were clergy.

Seeking better understanding, better evangelism, and more healthy and ethical ways of Christian living together, I became part of a number of commissions and study groups that looked at the scriptures, tradition and theology and talked with many people, including some who said they had been "healed" of homosexuality by therapy or prayer or a combination of these, along with others who had not found this change. I wrote a booklet titled *Christian Discipleship and Sexuality* with a study guide to help my own diocese and others talk and think about the issues.¹

Along with much of modern psychology and psychiatry, many of us came to understand that a homosexual orientation, while perhaps difficult for heterosexuals to understand, and certainly different from the majority orientation, was normal for some people. It was a complex phenomenon, with different gradations of orientation, and certainly different among men and women, which one might expect given the other differences between male and female sexuality. Why some people were strongly or more oriented in sexual attraction to members of the

same sex seemed to have no simple explanation, although there were and are no lack of theories, involving genetics, biology, nurture, and the environment. Cold or absent parents were both blamed and excused, leading some to an appropriate sense of humor with regard to all the theorizing. "My mother made me a homosexual," was the graffiti scrawled on a New York subway wall. Under this someone had written, "Can she make me one, too?"

Some, perhaps especially women, seem able to manage more choice in their orientation, but whatever the reasons, most gays and a number of lesbians are well oriented to the same sex in a manner in which they cannot be changed by therapies or prayers, however well-meant. Some of them, of course, have accepted the option, as do a number of heterosexuals, of celibacy. Many other gays and lesbians continue to feel their desire for giving and receiving sexual pleasure and for the intimacy and caring of a relationship that includes sexual relations.

What was one to say to them? They had in the past been told they were "disordered," "unnatural," "maladapted," "abnormal," and that God did not want them this way. While all people were sinners, they must be guilty of persisting in their sinning, since, if they truly repented, they would change their feelings. They were guilty, and the language of sin gave some people license even to persecute them.

My Episcopal church began by passing resolutions holding that gay and lesbian persons were entitled to inclusion and the full pastoral care of the church—though it was not clear what this meant, and practices varied from diocese to diocese and church-to-church. The pain and sorrow of HIV/AIDS, mainly although not exclusively a sickness among homosexuals at the time, caused many in the church to want to reach out with compassion if not full understanding and acceptance. The civil rights of gay and lesbian persons and their rights to be free from persecution and discrimination were repeatedly affirmed. Resolutions recommended several of the same rights for gay and lesbian couples that heterosexual couples have, although not going so far as to equate these with marriage. Some churches and some dioceses included "domestic partners" in their medical insurance programs. In some churches the life covenants of same-gender couples were affirmed and blessed. Gays and lesbians in committed relationships or who were regarded as mature in their sexuality and understanding of the call of all Christians to holiness and purity of life were ordained. The refusal of a court of bishops to charge a bishop who had presided at such an ordination with any canonical or theological offence seemed to give a broader permission to such ordinations.

A negative resolution of a 1998 international conference of Anglican bishops seemed to some to put a block on this "progress," but it was realized that many of these bishops were speaking from cultures and contexts in which there had been little pastoral experience with gays and lesbians. Both culture and religion, at least for the present, militated against even much open conversation. The support of a bishop like Desmond Tutu, however, speaking from his own knowledge of discrimination and persecution, was an encouragement to many gays and lesbians throughout the world and perhaps a harbinger of future church under-

standing. The 2000 Episcopal General Convention proceeded to acknowledge the presence of "couples in the Body of Christ and in this Church who are living in other life-long committed relationships," and the 2003 Convention will again be asked (earlier attempts failed to pass in close votes) to fashion a liturgy or liturgies for the affirmation of vows and the blessing of such covenants.

Although all this is clearly yet a work of the church in progress and the study, conversation, and debate continue, a fair amount of ground has been covered. Many Episcopalians have come to welcome the full inclusion of gays and lesbians as brother and sister Christians, expecting of them as of themselves the same aspirations to a life of love, service, and holiness. It is important to recognize that this has been—among Episcopalians and other churches and synagogues—more a work at the grassroots, locally and person-by-person, than by larger and more formal ecclesial action. The "conversion" to new understanding has been more the result of people coming to know, respect, and care for one another than of resolutions or changes in official teachings. If there is to be further change, I think this is the right movement and direction and the way that the church "catholic" (in the broad sense) best proceeds.

For those who have come to these new understandings, there is an awareness that gay and lesbian persons need not be seen as worshipping any other "god" nor to be engaged in pederasty or prostitution because of the ways they live and love. Nor need they be seen as confusing gender roles in some stereotypical manner. We recognize, too, that people of the biblical cultures could not have fully understood either the character of or the circumstances of a contemporary same-sex orientation or relationship. Although respectful of scriptural wisdom, we look for guidance to the larger hermeneutic and wisdom of the Bible's and Jesus' teaching about inclusion of the "stranger" (the different), the love of all neighbors, and Jesus' teaching that what makes "unclean" comes from within (see Mark 7:1–21).

We contemplate a more informed "natural theology" that includes the understandings of a refined Darwinism, modern psychology, and contemporary physics—all of which see the significance of much that is "abnormal" as a constituent and vital part of all that is normal, of the both/and, rather than either/or in the make-up of both the physical and biological worlds. We have come to recognize that what makes human sexuality so distinctive and human is the ability to say "no" and to be selective. Humans do not need to act on their sexual drive whenever there is an opportunity to procreate. Just as with other potentialities and abilities that have been humanly adopted (for instance, to do algebra and poetry) humans can "naturally" use sex for intimacy, eroticism and the making of love. Sometimes, and for good human reason, they will deliberately choose not to procreate. Whatever others may think of such, coitus interruptus, oral, and other means to orgasm have been and are used to exercise this responsibility and to gain pleasure. Often now physical, chemical, or medical contraception is employed. The key moral and ethical question would seem to be whether sexual activity can be used for purposes other than procreation and still be ethical. For those of us for whom the answer is affirmative, there might well then seem to be

a place for sexual expression on the part of those who are gay and lesbian. Moreover, many of those of us who are heterosexual have found that gay and lesbian relations are not a threat to the family or societal values. To the contrary, the coming together of persons in relationships of mutual care and support can lend stability to society and be supportive of families.

Issues and concerns do remain, both with regard to the churches' new understanding, full acceptance, and inclusion and especially for gay men in their daily lives. The strength of the male sexual drive can lead to obsessiveness, the manipulation and control of others, and promiscuity. Those who defend "recreational sex" do not seem to me to recognize the intimacy and vulnerability that human sexuality often awakens and the responsibility one to another that comes from this. Many of the same dangers are there for heterosexual men as well (including the transmission of disease to others), but gay males do not always have a context that encourages selectivity of activity and a deep abiding care for another that becomes a part of mature and truly relational sexual expression.

Yet many find this maturity and mutual care. For all of us, the sexual drive and all the hoopla and seduction, which the media uses to entice and sell, can make us too self-absorbed, self-deluding, selfish, and capable of misusing others sexually. When, however, our potential to say "no" and be selective and our often insecure search for acceptance, intimacy, mutuality of pleasure, care, and abiding love lead to a deepening relationship that also involves being willing to be sacrificial in the care for another, there, many of us recognize, vitality, fruitfulness for living, and blessing may be found.

NOTES

¹ Frederick H. Borsch, *Christian Discipleship and Sexuality* (Cincinnati: Forward Movement Press, 1992).

New Approaches to Welcoming Gay Men and Lesbians in Judaism **by Rebecca T. Alpert**

Reconciling Judaism and homosexuality has been one of my life projects, because it concerns me both personally and professionally. In 1976 I was ordained as a rabbi. In 1986 I came out as a lesbian. In the following years I needed to find a way to make those two parts of my life compatible, as I was not prepared to sacrifice either part of myself for the other, despite the seeming conflict. That new approaches have been taken and that the conflict seemed greater in 1986 than it does today are in no small part due to people like myself who have taken on the task of finding ways to integrate our gay and Jewish identities and to those straight allies in the Jewish community who understand the value of making sure there is a place at the table for gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender Jews who are committed to Jewish life.

I was raised in a secular household in New York City, where being Jewish was as natural as breathing. My parents had left the Reform and Orthodox traditions in which each was raised, but as a child I gravitated towards expressing my Jewishness religiously as well as ethnically and became involved on my own in a Reform congregation. Later when I decided to become a rabbi, I chose to do so through the Reconstructionist movement. Reconstructionism was tied more closely to traditional practice but had a more open approach to theology, and I found the environment there quite attractive. In neither place was homosexuality ever discussed. Since neither movement understood itself to be bound by traditional interpretations of Jewish law, the fact that male homosexual behavior was called an "abomination" in Leviticus was hardly the concern. That scriptural reading of the prohibition against male homosexuality in Leviticus, although read publicly both on a Sabbath in the spring and on the afternoon of Yom Kippur, went undiscussed. There was just a pervasive assumption that no Jews were homosexual, and it just wasn't a problem.

Even if homosexuality was never mentioned in those environments in the 1960s and 1970s, it was clear from the culture around me that "nice Jewish girls" married men and formed nuclear families. And what little I knew about lesbians (most of which came from psychology texts) was that they did not do those things. The pervasive understanding of what it meant to be a lesbian in those days was to be a woman who hated men and didn't want children or who wanted to be a man herself. As I did not identify with those characteristics and did want to be a rabbi, I was driven to try to ignore the erotic feelings I had towards women and girls for as long as I remembered. So I married a classmate in rabbinical school and began to raise children with him.

But in the 1980s something changed. A group of Jewish women who had come out as lesbians and left the Jewish community published a book of essays, ironically titled *Nice Jewish Girls*.¹ In it they told their stories of alienation from the Jewish community and of their simultaneous desire to find a place within Judaism where they could be fully themselves. This book sparked much conversation and provided the impetus for the school where I worked, the

Reconstructionist Rabbinical College (RRC), to begin to contemplate the possibility of ordaining openly gay and lesbian rabbis. As RRC took that bold step, I began to think about what it would mean for me also to be fully myself and to come out as a lesbian in the Jewish community. What it meant for me was a real sense of freedom and personal integrity. But it also meant that I was compelled to leave my job. RRC had decided to ordain open gay men and lesbians, and there was a lesbian on the faculty. But it was feeling pressure from the other arms of the Reconstructionist movement who said RRC moved too fast on this issue, and RRC worried about the effect such openness would have on its public image. No other Jewish institution would hire an open lesbian in 1986, and I found myself reinventing myself as a rabbi.

I left full-time rabbinic work but did not leave the rabbinate. I continued to teach and preach, to do weddings and funerals in Jewish settings whenever possible. I also discovered that I wanted to write about this experience and began to publish widely on lesbian issues in Judaism. These publications (often the token "lesbian" essay in Jewish feminist anthologies) led to a book: *Like Bread on the Seder Plate: Jewish Lesbians and the Transformation of Tradition*.² The book looked at biblical passages that were difficult for lesbians, for example, the passage in Leviticus that's interpreted to forbid women from marrying women (while it doesn't say anything explicitly about lesbians in the Bible, a later commentary interprets "the doings of Egypt" to have that meaning), the story of Adam and Eve, and the Levitical interdiction of male homosexual acts. It also looks at openings in the Bible, such as in the book of Ruth and other interpretations of the Garden of Eden. It reviews later rabbinic sources as well as hidden modern stories (like the life of Charlotte Wolff or the play by Sholom Asch, *The God of Vengeance*). It focuses on the incredible contributions of Jewish lesbian fiction to creating new role models and makes suggestions for holiday and life cycle events to celebrate lesbian lives.

I called the book *Like Bread on the Seder Plate* because of a story that I learned while doing research for the book and that exemplifies the experience of lesbians as they seek connection to the Jewish community. In the late 1970s, a *habad rebbetzin* came to speak to a group at the University of California at Berkeley on the topic of women and Jewish law. The rebbetzin was surprised by the question asked by a participant about the role of lesbians in Judaism, because at the time she was unaware that this might be an issue for anyone. She answered truthfully, using the analogy of eating bread on Passover, not acceptable, but a minor transgression. According to halakhah, lesbian activities are a minor transgression. They do not disqualify a woman who engages in lesbian sexual acts from her status as a virgin, and she remains eligible for marriage to a priest, the only context in which the subject is mentioned in the Talmud. For the woman who asked the question, her experience was quite different. As she discussed it among her friends, they agreed that they felt more as if lesbians in Judaism were like bread on the seder plate, a serious breach of Jewish public norms that would surely be seen as a rebellious and transgressive act. So that year they placed a crust of bread on the seder plate, as emblematic of their experience. Most Jewish

lesbians were uncomfortable with the act but compelled by the tale. When other Jewish lesbians heard the story, they substituted telling the tale for the act itself. They incorporated into their haggadot a passage about a woman who went to a (male) rabbi to ask the question about lesbians in Judaism, and received the angry answer, "lesbians in Judaism are like bread on the seder plate." But in the course of things, the story got changed. Soon we began to hear about a Jewish feminist who was talking on the subject of women in Judaism in a congregation in Florida, when a man rose from the back of the room to exclaim: "women on the bimah are like oranges on a seder plate." Now oranges on a seder plate, to represent the oppression of women in Judaism, have become a common addition to the seder. There are even seder plates now with a space for the orange! And lesbians have once again become invisible even in a story that began as an attempt to represent their pain and alienation.

I wrote that book as part of a movement to end the invisibility, to say that lesbians want a role in Jewish life. And over the past decade, lesbians have begun to find our places. The response of the liberal Jewish community has been nothing short of miraculous. We have coming out and commitment ceremonies in synagogues where we get household memberships. Our children are welcomed, and nontraditional families are embraced. And we have become leaders. Astonishingly, fifty out of the approximately three hundred women who serve in the rabbinate today identify as lesbian. It was this surprising fact that led me to ask two other lesbian rabbis to join me in editing a volume of stories that was published in 2001, *Lesbian Rabbis: The First Generation*.³ This volume tells the stories of eighteen of those lesbian rabbis, ordained at five different rabbinical schools (including Leo Baeck College in London). These rabbis work in mainstream congregations, in gay and lesbian synagogues, for national and regional Jewish organizations, and on the margins of the Jewish community. For the most part, they tell of their successes in making connections to the Jewish community and about the joys they experience in being engaged in rabbinic work. For some, the stories are more painful. Several wrote of their experiences in connection with the Conservative movement, which is still engaged in struggle over this issue. One of them left the Conservative Seminary and went on to ordination elsewhere. Of the two who were ordained, one still feels compelled to write anonymously for fear of losing her job. The other wrote more boldly in her own name but still with deep conflict and fear that the Conservative movement may yet try to keep her from serving as a rabbi.

The Lesbian Rabbis volume indicates clearly how far we have come from the mid-1980s. The change has been most rapid, although not uncontroversial. And there are many issues left to resolve. The Conservative movement needs to come to terms with the open secret of lesbians and gay men in leadership positions. And if the film *Trembling Before G-d* by Sandi Dubowski is any indication, the Orthodox community will also have to begin to find ways to integrate the gay and lesbian Orthodox Jews who want to maintain their contacts with Orthodoxy and also live openly. All the religious groups will need to begin to deal with the issues of bisexual and transgender Jews, as a new volume on *Queer*

*Jews*⁴ will make clear. Too much of the communal acceptance of gay and lesbian Jews has been because we are "acceptable." We are acceptable because we want to be in long-term monogamous relationships and to raise children. We are acceptable because we do not speak too assertively about the possibility that our homosexuality is freely chosen, rather than something we are born with, and because we don't talk about our erotic desires at all. We are acceptable because we don't question the gender stereotypes of what it means to be a man and what it means to be a woman. These are the issues that the Jewish community will face in the future.

So while there have been dramatic changes in Jewish life in welcoming gay men and lesbians, there is still much work to be done. It is inspiring to be the only openly gay person on this panel, however, because it means that this issue is important not only to those of us whose lives are at stake, but also to people for whom welcoming lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender religious people is simply a matter of principle.

NOTES

¹ Evelyn Torton Beck, ed. *Nice Jewish Girl: A Lesbian Anthology*, rev. and updated (Boston: Beacon Press, 1989).

² *Like Bread on the Seder Plate: Jewish Lesbians and the Transformation of Tradition* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997).

³ With Sue Elwell and Shirley Idelson, *Lesbian Rabbis: The First Generation* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2001).

⁴ Caryn Aviv and David Schneer, eds. *Queer Jews* (forthcoming from Routledge Press).

A Vision of Hope for Gay Catholics

by Donal Godfrey, S.J.

I belonged to the Jesuit community in Belfast, Northern Ireland, for four years. During that time I remember meeting a young man I will call Mark at some Gay Pride events in his native city of Derry. Mark later killed himself by jumping into the River Foyle, largely it seemed to me because he did not know how to accept himself as a gay man. Obviously one cannot say precisely what leads someone to such a tragic death. However I did find myself reflecting, on his premature death, this terrible loss, knowing that he was a Catholic, and I found myself asking the question why growing up in the Catholic Church in Ireland and England, and indeed up until that point, I had never heard any priest in any sermon ever say even one word of hope to someone like him. Within my church I heard silence at best on this topic; at worst hostility. Thinking of him, and others like him gave me the courage to speak out and ask for change. This desire on my part was strengthened when I came across posters plastered in some parts of Belfast that read: "God has a plan for homosexuals; AIDS is the first step." I didn't hear anyone in the mainstream churches say anything to counter such sentiments even if they did not agree with them. I believed that if we were a more loving, more accepting church, people like Mark might find the courage to find life and meaning in their sexual orientation, to see it as a blessing rather than a curse. And maybe too, we would also be closer to the Jesus we profess to follow.

As long ago as 1976 the American Catholic bishops stated:

Homosexuals like everyone else, should not suffer from prejudice against their basic human rights. They have a right to respect, friendship and justice. They should have an active role in the Christian community.¹

More recently the U.S. Bishops (through their Committee on Marriage and Family), gave a pastoral message to the parents of gay children asking that church ministers and priests:

Welcome homosexual persons into the faith community. Seek out those on the margins. Avoid stereotyping and condemnations. Strive first to listen...

Use the words "homosexual," "gay," "lesbian" in honest and accurate ways, especially from the pulpit. In various and subtle ways you can give people "permission" to talk about homosexual issues among themselves and let them know that you're also willing to talk with them...

To our homosexual brothers and sisters we offer a concluding word. ... We need one another if we are to "grow in every way into him who is our head, Christ..." Though at times you may feel discouraged, hurt or angry, do not walk away from your families, from the Christian

community, from all those who love you. In you God's love is revealed. You are always our children.²

As I see it, this conference is about how we can make our churches and synagogues safe places that genuinely welcome gay and lesbian Christians and Jews in ways appropriate to whichever particular faith tradition. In Northern Ireland I initiated and ran a series of weekend retreats for gay Catholic and Protestant men in an attempt to do just this. I wanted to create a place where gay men could be open about being spiritual and gay. In Northern Ireland gay people could be open about being gay in the gay world to some extent, but not about being spiritual. And in the church gay people had to remain silent about being gay.

The focus of my talk is the ways we as Catholics can begin to create an inclusive and welcoming church for Catholics who happen to be gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender intersexual, or questioning. I want to deal with the pastoral realities mostly, as Dr. Patti Jung dealt compellingly with the moral teaching of the Church earlier in the conference. As I see it the problem is not that of homosexuality in the church, but rather that of homophobia and heterosexism. I think it might fairly be said that we still have a ways to go to realize this goal in the Roman Catholic Church!

I contend that even Catholics who feel very differently about the moral teachings, for or against them, can come to see that we need to create welcoming and inclusive space for gay people in our church. Let me just say this, however. I hope that the Catholic Church is big enough to allow the conversation about the moral teaching to take place. Certainly the time has come to drop any talk of intrinsic evil in relation to homosexuality. Dropping such language will not change the teaching of the church on this issue, but will certainly help to create the space needed for dialogue and listening. These words have changed their meaning and are misunderstood these days by gay people as a condemnation of their very essence. For we really do need to listen to the experience of gay Catholics and grapple with the questions their experience raises. Silencing the conversation before the questions have hardly begun short-circuits the whole process.

For regardless of what you believe regarding the moral teaching, the problem is that most of our churches still dehumanize and shame gay Catholics. Gay people suffer from deep prejudice in most of our churches. Such prejudice has nothing to do with the gospel of Jesus.

I am studying the parish of Most Holy Redeemer in San Francisco for the degree of Doctor of Ministry at the Church Divinity School of the Pacific in Berkeley. The congregation of Most Holy Redeemer is situated in the heart of the Castro, which as you probably know, was the world's first gay neighborhood. Before it was a mostly Irish Catholic neighborhood. My study examines how this community became inclusive and welcoming of the gay community. It is not *per se* a gay parish; no such parish could exist in the Catholic Church. However every parish is reflective of its demographics and geography, and Most Holy Redeemer is no exception. MHR is affirming of its gay, lesbian, bisexual, and

transgender parishioners, just as Catholic parishes in predominantly Philippine neighborhoods are affirming of Philippine culture and are influenced by it. I believe that, while the circumstances of Most Holy Redeemer Parish are unique, there are lessons in this story for Catholic parishes everywhere. My study indeed shows how it is possible for part of the institutional Catholic Church, a Catholic Parish, to be open and affirming, how gay and straight people together in mutual respect and openness can create a healthy and vital religious community. And if such change is possible in one small corner of the Roman Catholic world, then why can it not be possible elsewhere? At Most Holy Redeemer it was when gay and straight people, at the time mostly younger gay men and older Irish women, faced the suffering and devastation that AIDS was causing in this city that the parish came together as a prophetic community. This parish has been through the crucible of fire. At one time wags called the parish the "Gay and the Gray!"

One parishioner Patrick Mulcahey, told me:

I came to Most Holy Redeemer at a critical point in my life. Many gay men at a similar juncture in their lives would have looked to a counselor or a therapist, but I think that is just a symptom of how the psychosocial category stunts us and keeps us ignorant of ourselves. We tend to experience unhappiness, even anomie, as somehow owing to our sexuality, I suppose because it is more deeply part of us than anything else we can name, so we have fostered a class of professionals with skills to adjust us...

Lighting did strike me the first time I came to MHR, but not for the reasons you'd think (or maybe you would). It wasn't being in a hall with hundreds of gay men that did it. Lord knows, that wasn't a new experience. It was the Mass itself. It was the homily, given by Fr. Tom Hayes, who seemed to be speaking to me, just to me, to my starved and withered heart and soul. It was what any Catholic would feel after twenty-odd years away; it was the church itself, in all its majesty and mystery and ordinary goodness, in the sturdy beauty of a well-wrought liturgy. With this difference: for the first time since I was old enough to understand myself as a sexual being, it was a church that wasn't pushing me away. That's all. That's it. Any Catholic who'd been on a desert island for twenty years would have felt the same thing upon walking into a church where a wise and decent priest was saying Mass. But I couldn't have felt it in any other church. You see?

People don't understand why gay men and lesbians migrate to San Francisco, Los Angeles, Miami, New York, cities all around the world that have flourishing gay ghettos. Usually we don't understand ourselves; "To be with 'others of our kind,' to have wild sex and go to great parties?" But the truth is mostly we come here to forget about being gay, to just drop that burden—to just be human. For us MHR is the church where you can go and just be Catholic.³

Patrick puts his finger on what we need desperately in every Catholic parish, the creation of safe space so that Catholics who happen to be gay can just be Catholic. I actually am hopeful that it is beginning to happen in other parishes and Catholic centers around the country. Many dioceses now have one or two parishes where gay Catholics can be open about this part of their lives. The number is growing. As change takes place in the wider society on this issue, we as a church are also changed. With over 60 million members in this country we cannot ever be isolated from developments in the wider culture. Retreat houses, such as San Damiano here in the Bay Area now regularly offer affirming retreats for gays, their families and friends. An increasing number of Catholic schools have begun diocesan-approved gay-straight alliances. Indeed there is one at the Jesuit school, St. Ignatius, here in San Francisco. These developments give me great hope. Change is taking place in the Catholic Church from the ground up, and this is being recognized in some cases at an official level. This process is happening in North America, Europe, South Africa, and Australia. I don't see such change in the Roman Catholic Church in most of the world, including my own country Ireland. Certainly some priests and those in ministry may be changing in Ireland, but there are not yet any structural changes to create this safe space for gay people. I came across this letter from Thomas O'Connor in *The Irish Times*, written in response to comments by the pope expressing bitterness about an international Rome gay pride event that was held in Rome during the Jubilee year:

Perhaps the Church should lead the world in its compassion and try to instigate dialogue, understanding and acceptance of homosexuals instead of "bashing us" every chance it gets.⁴

Indeed I often meet former Catholics who are gay here in San Francisco. Quite often they are angry and feel alienated from the church of their upbringing. I am sure you have seen the T-shirt that proclaims "Recovering Catholic." I also meet Catholics at Most Holy Redeemer who say they couldn't be a practicing Catholic if it were not for a parish like that. I long for the day when a pope might have a similar approach to this issue as Catholic Bishop Giallot of Partenia, a desert in North Africa (He was removed from his diocese in Evreux, sadly, because among other things, he was too open pastorally to gay people.) Giallot says that the church must not be scared of homosexuals, rather we should ask forgiveness:

He explained that he had received a request from a gay couple to bless their marriage. "Please receive us, although we are pariahs of the Church," he said the couple had asked him. "I've got AIDS. My life will soon come to an end. Therefore we would very much like you to bless our union. It would be such a comfort." Gaillot said he agreed to meet the couple and "to say a prayer, a sign of welcome and understanding."⁵

To a large extent the Catholic Church is not a credible moral voice within the gay community. If you ever read the gay press at times you might think that war had been declared between the two. I hear many gay people say that they did not leave the church but rather that the church left them when they accepted themselves as gay. And certainly in the current crisis of the Catholic Church, matters were made worse recently when Vatican spokesperson Joaquin Navarro-Valls questioned the validity of the ordination of gay men. Then there is the equating of homosexuality and pedophilia implicitly by some church officials and also by some in the media. I thought we had gone beyond the stage where it was necessary to remind people that homosexuality and child abuse are separate issues—and that homosexuals are no more likely than heterosexuals to be pedophiles. But then maybe I have just lived for too long in San Francisco!

Rather than be a search for scapegoats, the present crisis might better point us to the deeper malaise, our seeming inability as an institution to deal in healthy ways with issues of power and sexuality. Zero tolerance for pedophilia and sexual abuse must not be translated into zero tolerance for gay priests. I remember a fellow Jesuit who happened to be both gay and an alcoholic in recovery. One day in his sermon he preached on how he had found God in finding sobriety; well, after the Mass a woman came up to him and said, thinking she was consoling him, "You know Father, things could be worse, you could be a homosexual!" Indeed, instead of trying to screen out gay candidates as some such as Navarro-Valls are now suggesting, it would be healthier if priests were able to be more open about these matters. Right now some gay priests fear a possible witch-hunt. The issue is really not about whether a priest is gay or straight. We must resist the temptation to place gay and straight clergy in opposition to each other; rather the issue is whether there is a sufficient maturity and integration of sexuality into the rest of a person's life. Rather than screen out gay candidates as some are now suggesting, I think it would be much healthier to encourage seminarians to come to understand and own, and then be more open and comfortable with, their given sexual orientation. As James Keenan wrote in *The Tablet* recently: "Among the clergy, gay and straight work more easily with one another and with the laity when they are mature and at ease with their own sexuality."⁶

Andrew Sullivan is both Catholic and gay. He says the church is like the family that cannot talk about the subject even though its own daughter or son is queer. Sullivan says that queer Catholics need to make themselves known so that the rest of the church can listen and learn:

Why not a teaching about the nature of homosexuality and what its good is. How can we be good? Teach us. How does one inform the moral lives of homosexuals? The church has an obligation to all its faithful to teach us how to live and how to be good—which is not the mere dismissal, silence, embarrassment or a "unique" doctrine on one's inherent disorder. Explain it. How does God make this? Why does God make this?...

I grew up with nothing. No one taught me anything except that this couldn't be mentioned. And as a result of the total lack of teaching, gay Catholics and gay people in general are in crisis. No wonder people's lives—many gay lives—are unhappy or distraught or in dysfunction, because there is no guidance at all. Here is a population within the church, and outside the church, desperately seeking health and values. And the church refuses to come to our aid, refuses to listen to this call.⁷

This process of creating a safe space is a challenge both for gay Catholics and for the rest of the church. Gay Catholics are learning to be more assertive, to come out, and ask for change. However this requires the willingness of others to listen and be willing to take action to make our churches safe and inclusive spaces. I am reminded of a good friend of mine who is a priest in the Oakland diocese, and who was approached by a lesbian parishioner who challenged him saying that in twelve years as a faithful Catholic in that parish she had never once heard any recognition that Catholics such as her existed. She felt she was tolerated as long as she did not speak up about this part of her life. My priest friend said he could only agree. As he said to me, "I may be straight but I'm not narrow. I simply had never thought about preaching on this matter. One consequence of that conversation was that I gave a homily that opened up the subject in that parish in a way this lesbian parishioner told me was very supportive. And a result of the homily was that the topic began to open up in our parish." Silence on this topic is, as Sullivan argues, simply an inadequate response. Silence forces people to split themselves into two, to live a hidden life that is a lie, to live in fear; and it also deprives the wider community of so much. Silence alone, or mere toleration, does not make a parish, a school, or indeed a Catholic, Jesuit University, such as the University of San Francisco, a welcoming community.

The role of my priest friend, and that of other straight Catholics, is to act as allies in making such change possible. Gay people are beginning no longer to see themselves as the recipients of ministry but as rather the very ones who will bring about the change by doing the ministry themselves, by being prophetic and challenging the silence and fear that surrounds this issue.

Roman Catholic Bishop Gumbleton has often spoken of the need for gays to come out in order to break down stereotypes and prejudices. Gumbleton tells the story of how his family was changed when his brother came out.⁸ Catholics, like anyone else, usually change and become more open to the issues when they know a friend or family member who is openly gay. In theology class I was always told that the church is not just a teaching church but also a listening church. Right now, on this issue, we need a lot more attentive listening so that the voices of gay Catholics are finally heard. Then the Catholic Church may begin to represent for gay people a place of hope rather than the memory of rejection. The posters for this conference state that the speakers will present new ideas about how to reconcile the issue of homosexuality within the Jewish and Christian traditions. Sad to say these are new ideas for the largest part of the Roman Catholic Church. The good news is that they are no longer new ideas

everywhere in the Catholic Church. Things are changing. And yet, in another way, aren't they very old ideas indeed? Those of us who call ourselves Christians do after all profess to follow Jesus of Nazareth, a man who especially befriended the marginalized in society. I remember once hearing Bono of U2 saying that Jesus would have felt at home hanging out in a gay bar; I would add maybe more so than in some of our churches. For something is seriously wrong when, with some exceptions such as at Most Holy Redeemer, Dignity, the Newman Center, and a small but thankfully growing number of parishes, gay people such as Patrick Mulcahey and Thomas O'Connor do not feel comfortable, welcome, or at home in most of our churches. I feel that unless we are willing to go into a real and equal dialogue with those who are struggling with their sexuality in terms of their faith, we are not responding as Jesus would.

The choice, as Richard Smith suggests as the thesis of his book: *AIDS, Gays and the American Catholic Church*⁹ is not between an inherited tradition and the latest politically correct fashion. Rather it is between a tradition that has become rigid and strangling to many people, and one that is flexible enough to grow. A living tradition, one that springs from our faith in Jesus, from the scriptures, and for Catholics from church teaching and the tradition, needs a willingness to interact with other cultures, and this must include gay culture. The call of the Second Vatican Council was that we read the "Signs of the Times." In other words, we need to ask what is it that God is trying to say to us through the experience, and voice of gay Catholics, their voices being heard for the first time in history. Can we try to discern together what gifts God is bringing to the wider church through gay Catholics? This is a very different approach from seeing gay people as a threat and as somehow undermining what we are about.

In the context of the dialogue between gay people and the wider church, as Smith argues, we need a mutual and respectfully critical assessment of each side's symbols and values, a recognition of the legitimate and positive elements within, and where appropriate, an assimilation of those positive elements of the other culture into one's own. This is not the same as an uncritical acceptance of everything as found either in the church or in the gay community.

There is neither justice nor merit in the mentality that claims to tolerate gays and lesbians as long as they know their place and keep to it. For far too long, such a mentality made racial minorities and women into victims. The challenge today is to see homosexuality as a blessing rather than as a curse, and then the church's pastoral role is to help gay people embrace who they are, created in the image of God. Can people be helped to see their sexual orientation as part of their Christian calling and vocation?

I want to see dioceses around the world implement plans based on such a strategy. In this regard it is a great pity that the diocese of San Francisco does not take such action, unlike the diocese of Oakland across the Bay. Important organizations such as the Association of Catholic Diocesan Lesbian and Gay Ministries, Dignity, and New Ways already raise many of these questions in the context of North America.

I long to hear my church acknowledge the sin of homophobia, ask for forgiveness from gay people, and to take action to create an inclusive church. For after all, it is part of the body of Christ that is gay. For too long we have seemed to make this issue an exception to the rule of Christian love. Certainly I see signs of hope that this is changing. I am confident that the words that Archbishop Tutu once said of the Christian churches will one day no longer be true. Tutu said that the churches make gay and lesbian people doubt if they are children of God, and that, he said, must be almost the ultimate blasphemy.

I know that gay people differ greatly on this issue as on all, but I sense a growing wish to no longer be the object of pity or mere tolerance let alone hostility. Increasingly Catholic gay people want to be seen as equals, capable of collaborating with straight Catholics in the Christian task of helping to build the world that Jesus is on about in the Gospels, the world that he so deeply desires for our world today, a world that is just and humane for all. The creation of safe space for gay Catholics is still very much resisted. Such space must be created if we are to be true to our mission as followers of Jesus Christ.

NOTES

¹ National Conference of Catholic Bishops, *To Live in Christ Jesus: A Pastoral Reflection on the Moral Life*. Washington, D.C., 1976, 19.

² A Statement of the Bishops Committee on Marriage and Family, National Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Always Our Children: A Pastoral Message to Parents of Homosexual Children and Suggestions for Pastoral Ministers*. Washington, D.C., 1997.

³ Patrick Mulcahey, written at request of the author, October 24, 2001.

⁴ Thomas O'Connor, quoted by Donal Godfrey in "Rome's Rebels Speaking Out," *Gay Community News*, Dublin, Issue 132, September 2000. 14.

⁵ Thomas C. Fox, foreword to *Voice From the Desert*, by Bishop Jacques Giallot (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1966), 5.

⁶ James Keenan, "The Purge of Boston," *The Tablet*, 30 March 2002, 18.

⁷ Andrew Sullivan, "I'm Here: Interview with Andrew Sullivan," by Thomas H. Stahel, S.J., *America*, May 1993, Vol. 168, No. 16, 11.

⁸ Chuck Colbert, "For gay Catholics, conscience is the key," *National Catholic Reporter*, Kansas City, January 16, 1998. 17.

⁹ Richard Smith, *AIDS, Gays and the American Catholic Church*. (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 1994).